

The Future of International Statistics - a view from the South

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I would like to begin these comments by commending the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía, e Informática de México - INEGI - for the exceptional demonstration of organizational capability and technical competence in the organization of this meeting. However, I have to warn also that INEGI may be doing a disservice if it gives the impression that all statistical offices in the region are like it. The fact is that very few Latin American statistical institutes besides Mexico and Brazil could participate at all in this meeting, and there is nobody from Africa and other regions of the world.

The picture we get from so many presentations given to this Conference is that official statistics is changing very rapidly, not only within countries, but also as an international endeavor. New technologies are shortening the time between data collection and information delivery, changing demands are leading the statistical offices to widen the scope of their coverage, international coordination and standardization are evolving, and a new frontier, for the collection and publication of cross-national data, is also emerging.

Statistical offices in less developed countries have to adjust to this new picture in a context characterized by two challenges. One is that governments, everywhere, are shrinking, and the statistical offices are facing the need to compete for scarce resources with other legitimate claimers of public funds. The other is that new actors are entering the scene for data production and dissemination - statistical departments from other government agencies and sub-national administrative units (states and municipalities), private organizations, academic institutions, and international organizations.

Given this combination of dwindling public resources and growing competition for data production and distribution, would it not be reasonable just to close or to privatize the public statistical offices? There are good reasons why this should not be done. Countries need long-term, comprehensive, stable and internationally comparable information, which are public goods and cannot be expected to be produced by private organizations. Only public institutions can receive and protect the rights of access to confidential data. Additional types of information, however, or information tailored to specific users, can be provided by other institutions besides the official statistical offices, and each country should decide how much of this additional data should be produced by their public statistical offices, and how much

should be done by other sectors in society. As decentralization increases, the need for coordination also increases, and many statistical offices face the need to change from sheer data production to an increased role of coordination.

I suggest that statistical offices should pursue four main goals to respond and adapt to the new challenges.

First, they should become more creative in the use of advanced methodologies for data collection, processing and dissemination. With better sampling, it is possible to increase coverage and reduce costs. Better public registries, and the imaginative processing of these data sources can reduce the need for primary data collection. Traditional, mainframe-based data processing can be replaced by much cheaper and more efficient network, decentralized computer facilities. Computer-based dissemination and the use of new media such as CD-ROMs and the Internet can reduce the cost and volume of paper-based products, and provide better and timelier information to users. With new technologies, it is possible to produce more and better products for a fraction of the cost, but there are start-up costs for training, systems development and the transition from old to new computer platforms and data processing routines, which can be expensive and time consuming.

Second, statistical offices have to be more creative in the establishment of alliances and cooperative links with other data producing institutions within the countries and international organizations. Partnership with other government, academic and international organizations allow for the sharing of resources, increased legitimacy and access to knowledge and competence the statistical offices need. These cooperative links bring a series of issues and problems which fully centralized statistical offices do not have to face. How to keep and maintain the rules of confidentiality when data is collected by different organizations? How to make sure that data is being collected and processed in a consistent way? How to assure the timeliness of dissemination? Who will be responsible for maintaining the data sets on the long run? Which will be the rules for data access and analysis? How to share costs?

Third, official statistics institutions have to strive for full institutionalization as independent technical bodies. Today, most official statistical offices are treated by their governments as just another branch of their bureaucracies, leading to two sets of problems. The first is that they are subject to nationally uniform policies for personnel and resource administration that are often incompatible with their needs and responsibilities. Secondly, and more seriously, they are open to external interference in the nomination of their top leadership and even in the way they collect and publish their information. Fortunately, it is becoming increasingly clear that official statistics that are tampered by governments have no credibility and are useless, and this realization has refrained most governments from interfering with the work of their statistical offices. But this is clearly not enough. Statistical offices have to be formally protected from occasional governments by predefined mandates for their high

officers; stable, legitimate supervising bodies; long term and stable budgets; and appropriate rules for personnel and resource administration.

Fourth, and probably more important than anything else, statistical offices must increase their professional and technical competence. In many countries, statistical offices are still dominated by administrative personnel, performing routine tasks of data collection and processing, which can be rapidly replaced by modern computer technologies and external contracting of routine tasks. Professional competence is necessary to incorporate new technologies, to keep the information up-to-date with the current state of the art, and to give the institutes legitimacy and recognition among other significant actors in the countries and abroad.

In short, for the next century, the provision of public statistics will continue to be a vital function to be performed by autonomous, public institutions, which will be probably smaller and more efficient than what they are or wish to become today. These institutions will be knowledge-intensive organizations, relying very heavily on new statistical and computer technologies, and working in close alliances with a host of national and international organizations, and with the academic world. Because they will become more efficient, more relevant and leaner operations, there is no reason why they should not evolve in this direction. However, for many countries in the South, the transition for this new format will not be easy, and cannot be taken for granted, because of the initial start-up costs, and because of the required change of attitudes, both from the statistical offices themselves and from their governments. The International Association of Official Statistics can play an important role in helping countries and their statistical offices in this transition.